EPA eyes sweeping changes

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Betsy Scott/BScott@News-Herald.com

Mentor equipment operator Ron Slapak empties a street sweeper of debris for the Public Works Department.

Area officials not sold on value of recycling street debris

Betsy Scott
BScott@News-Herald.com

In these environmentally conscious and cash-strapped times, most local government entities would jump at the chance to recycle and save money simultaneously.

That is not the case in this area when it comes to an Ohio Environmental Protection Agency proposal to allow recycling of street sweepings.

The EPA in March mailed proposed guidelines for alternative management options for the sweepings to groups representing solid waste management districts, municipalities, villages, townships, counties and other interested parties.

"In some cases, we can better use these materials, saving generators money, conserving landfill space, and protecting public health and the environment," the EPA letter states.

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Most Ohio communities send the sweepings to landfills at an average disposal cost of $40 per ton, Ohio EPA spokeswoman Linda Oros said.

The EPA estimates that a large city could vacuum as much as 9,750 tons of street debris annually and pay up to $390,000 in dumping fees. By recycling, a community could save about 30 percent to 50 percent, including the cost of disposal, analysis of the sweepings and savings on whatever use the recycled matter is put toward, Oros said.

"Other cities have programs like this, and we felt that if locations in Ohio wanted to do it, they would need some guidance in how to do it," she said.

Why recycle?

Street sweepings are regulated as municipal solid waste in Ohio and many other states. Preliminary studies indicate that heavy metals, hydrocarbons, pesticides and other contaminants might be present in the matter collected. In addition, excess nutrients might degrade water quality and cause fish kills and algae blooms, according to the EPA.

A number of potential alternatives to landfilling street sweepings exist, but the EPA wants to ensure that beneficial uses don't negatively impact existing pollution abatement activities or threaten public health or the environment. Sweepings would have to be screened and tested for chemicals of concern and meet criteria authorized by the EPA before being considered a "beneficial" use.

The beneficial uses under consideration include fill for potholes — provided sweepings are covered with asphalt or impermeable concrete — and highway medians, and blending with road salt or grit to apply to icy streets in the winter. Another possibility is as an alternate "daily cover," or dirt-based litter control placed over freshly dumped garbage to protect it overnight at the landfill.

The deadline for official comment was last month and the EPA has received a few dozen responses so far. The agency now is evaluating the feedback, Oros said.

"The idea is to take into consideration the comments received and determine whether it's something that needs to move forward," she said. "Each community would have to evaluate this and determine if it would make sense for them. Do they have the equipment, the budget to put together the program? If they don't collect a large amount of street sweepings, it might not be beneficial."

What they're saying

States including Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota and New Jersey allow cities to recycle sweepings.

The city of Maplewood, Minn., uses it as bedding for new storm mains. Street Superintendent Bryan Nagle said the city recycles 800 to 1,600 tons each year.

However, local public service officials surveyed don't see it as practical for their communities.

Last year, the city of Mentor landfilled 578 tons of street-sweeping debris at $30 per ton at a total cost of $17,340.

"We would certainly want to take a look at any opportunity to save money," Mentor Public Works Director Matt Schweikert said. "I would say, however, that I am not a big fan of mixing grit with salt during the winter since it will then have to be removed either from the road or from the storm sewers."

The city of Painesville mixes cinders from its electric generation plant with salt. Trucks that deliver coal to the plant take away the residue and street sweepings with it.

"We really don't pay anything for that," Public Service Director Kevin Lynch said.

Many officials expressed curiosity about potential uses for sweepings, which they report range from paper to pop cans and cigarette butts to brassieres.

"You can't believe what you get in there," Willoughby Public Service Director Angelo Tomaselli said. "Whatever blows off of cars, whatever people throw out there, whatever's on the lawns."

The filtering process that would be required for sweepings would be considerably more expensive than hauling to a landfill, Lake County Engineer Jim Gills said.

Chris Hodges, Lake County Solid Waste District coordinator, addressed the "daily cover" use.

"My main concern is, any runoff from rainwater off that daily cover ends up leaching into the soil and/or retention basins," he said. "We would be responsible for the quality of that water."

Euclid Public Service Director Randy L. Smith said he could see where recycling could be applicable in more rural areas.

"It might be beneficial because it's truly grit and not the other material," he said.

The city of Chardon pays a contractor $5,800 a season to sweep the streets, starting after the annual Maple Festival in the spring.

"The stuff that we're picking up pretty much goes in the Dumpster," Public Service Director Gayland Moore said.

The Columbus Dispatch contributed to this article.